

California plans to unleash fly to crush ivy invasion

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Coastal Californians battling pervasive Cape ivy have been waiting years for a helpful fly with a regal name.

Now, Agriculture Department officials are finally getting ready to pull the trigger, turning the fly loose on the vine that has infested shady parts of the Pacific Coast. The fly deposits its eggs on the Cape ivy, causing a huge boil-like growth known as a gall to form on the plant's stem and stunt its growth.

For San Luis Obispo County resident David Chipping, it's about time.

"Invasion of both upland and riparian habitat by Cape ivy long ago reached crisis proportions in our county," Chipping told the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Chipping, a Los Osos resident and member of the California Native Plant Society's San Luis Obispo Chapter, this month added his voice to a others supporting a federal proposal to release of the fly, known as *Parafreutreta regalis*.

The fly would target Cape ivy, which can climb up to 30 feet, crowding out other coastal plants and requiring frequent herbicide treatments along roadways and in places like parts of Morro Bay State Park.

"Cape ivy is a major problem in coastal riparian areas in California, smothering native vegetation," said Gerald H. Meral, former deputy director of the California Natural Resources Agency. "An effective biocontrol agent would make a big difference in protecting these areas."

Meral, who is now with the private Natural Heritage Institute, and Chipping were among only a dozen or so people to offer public comments about the Agriculture Department's proposal as of Friday. All support the proposed release of the flies

to control what's also been called German ivy.

But the comment period, which lasts through next Monday, did not come easy. Some studies that supported the proposal began so long ago that the lead scientist has since retired. Research funding has sometimes been hard to get. Lab priorities have sometimes shifted.

Cost-effectiveness has not been the only consideration. Under several executive orders, Agriculture Department officials also had to consult with Indian tribes and examine potential specific effects on children and "any minority populations and low-income populations."

In brief, the wheels have turned methodically. Approval could still be months away.

"Biocontrol of weeds is always a long process," said Joe Balciunas. A retired Agricultural Research Service entomologist. "I thought this one would go faster, but I was wrong."

Balciunas and colleagues began testing at an Albany, Calif.-based Agricultural Research Service lab in 2001. Balciunas retired six years ago. A technical advisory panel recommended approval three years ago. An environmental assessment found that the biocontrol program would be safe and effective. It was completed more than 14 months ago.

"It grinds exceedingly slow," Balciunas said.

Cape ivy is a native of South Africa and was brought into the United States as an ornamental ground cover. Then, it spread, including into areas where herbicide use may be limited. In places like the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, managers resort to hand tools.

"Other methods such as goat grazing and prescribed fire are being used," the environmental

assessment noted.

If left uncontrolled, the ivy becomes a bully. A study at Golden Gate National Recreation Area found that sites infested by Cape ivy for 5 to 10 years had 78 percent fewer annual plant species than uninfested plots.

Enter the Cape ivy gall fly, which is also a native of South Africa. After mating, the females insert eggs into part of the ivy's stem. When the eggs hatch, growths known as galls form on the plant and stunt its growth.

Initial plans call for pairs of flies to be placed in field cages over Cape ivy patches in several locations along the California coast, Alameda and Contra Costa counties. In time, the cages would be removed and the flies would disperse naturally.

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